

DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

AMENDMENT TO THE LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN
Concerning Standards and Guidelines for Determining Proper Use
of Available Forage by Commercial Livestock

SIERRA NATIONAL FOREST
Fresno, Madera and Mariposa Counties
California

I. INTRODUCTION

An environmental assessment (Assessment) has been prepared to describe the effects of a proposed amendment to the Sierra National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan (Forest Plan) concerning standards and guidelines for determining proper use of available forage by commercial livestock. This Decision Notice describes my decision with regard to the proposed amendment and the analysis record which is available for review at the Sierra National Forest Headquarters in Clovis, California.

**II. ADMINISTRATIVE DECISION BEING MADE
AND RATIONALE FOR SELECTION**

Based on my review of the Assessment, I have decided to implement Alternative 4. As described in the Assessment, this action would: (1) Define a Desired Condition for rangelands on the Sierra National Forest; (2) Implement revised Forest-wide allowable use standards and guidelines based upon the Desired Condition; (3) Establish proper use for annual grasslands using residual dry matter standards; (4) Establish proper use for montane meadows and riparian areas using stubble height standards; (5) Establish proper use of upland herbaceous and woody vegetation using utilization standards; and (6) Incorporate those standards into all relevant grazing permits.

In reviewing the Alternatives I find that Alternative 4 will result in a better livestock distribution, uniform herbaceous residual levels, accelerated range improvement conditions, a reliable monitoring method that is statistically valid, accelerated improvement of most riparian areas, residual plant cover for streambank protection and sediment entrapment, accelerated improvement of degraded areas, long-term improvement of water quality, maintain long-term soil stability and would result in a general enhancement or improvement of habitat for all fish and wildlife species potentially affected by livestock grazing. Additionally, I specifically find that Alternative 4 best meets the needs of establishing proper use standards on all types of riparian vegetation and best compliments other standards and guidelines in managing habitat for threatened, endangered and sensitive fish, wildlife and plant species across the Forest.

I believe that implementing the standards and guidelines, as described in Alternative 4, will best meet the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan in the management of rangeland-related resources. Through this analysis, the Forest Service has developed a proposed action which I feel is most responsive to input received from resource specialists and the public. This alternative is proactive in establishing new

direction for the range management program on this Forest. In considering standards and guidelines for commercial livestock grazing, several criteria were used:

- (1) Make the Standard and Guidelines (S&Gs) easily applicable given current knowledge of resource conditions;
- (2) Establish S&Gs which allow for a well-balanced range program that is both effective and efficient in achieving the desired condition;
- (3) Design S&Gs which can be adapted to more complex analysis or application of ecological concepts;
- (4) Use S&Gs which are based on easily identified indicators of rangeland health;
- (5) Apply S&Gs which give consideration to other resource values associated with rangelands on the forest; and
- (6) Describe S&Gs which can be implemented forest-wide in a timely manner.

IV. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The **purpose** of the Proposed Action and the Environmental Assessment has been to analyze whether the Sierra National Forest should: (1) Incorporate current allowable use guidelines referenced in the draft Regional Field Guide (1993) as maximum allowable use standards into the Forest Plan (No Action); OR 2) Consider other alternatives for amending the Forest Plan. The standards and guidelines would be incorporated as Level II Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines (ref. LRMP, 1-5). They would supersede existing Standard #85b and identify minimum amounts of forage that will be held from commercial livestock operators to protect other resource values.

The **need** for these standards and guidelines is to provide Forest officers and Forest users a clear description of what is proper allowable use of available forage for livestock, while protecting other resource values such as productive soils, desired vegetation, high quality water, wildlife, and fisheries habitats.

V. CONSULTATION, COORDINATION AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The initial public involvement began in 1994 with a scoping letter mailed on October 28th. That letter was followed by a clarification letter on November 3rd. A third letter, describing Alternative 3 was mailed November 14th. A public scoping meeting was held at the Clovis Veterans Memorial Building on November 15th. Meeting notes, from the 40 people who attended, were recorded, summarized and mailed in a letter on November 18th to those who attended.

On January 6, 1995, an initial environmental assessment report was sent out for public review and comment. A total of fourteen responses were received during the final review period. The mailing list and names of those who attended the public meeting, along with those written comments from the initial environmental assessment (1/95), are on file at the Sierra National Forest Supervisor's Office located at 1600 Tollhouse Road, Clovis, California.

Other natural resource specialists and government agencies who received the scoping document include:

California State Department of Fish and Game, Fresno, California
California State Lands Commissioner, Sacramento, California
California State Board of Forestry, Sacramento, California
Fresno County Board of Supervisors, Fresno, California
Frost, Bill. UC Cooperative Extension
Fuller, Ken. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Kie, John G. Pacific Southwest Research Station
Lomelli, Henry. California Fish & Game
Lechner, Matt. Sequoia National Forest
Madera County Board of Supervisors, Madera, California
McDougald, Neil. UC Cooperative Extension
Ratliff, Raymond D. Pacific Southwest Research Station
Stubbs, Kevin. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Folsom, California
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sacramento, California
U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station, Fresno, California
Warne, Betty. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

VI. RELEVANT ISSUES AND THEIR RESOLUTION

A number of "Key Issues" were identified in response to internal and public scoping efforts for the proposal. What follows is a short summary of how the Selected Alternative addresses those Key Issues.

(1) What are the impacts from various grazing standards on riparian resources?

Alternative 4, the Selected Alternative, best meets the needs for establishing proper use standards on the various types of riparian vegetation that occur across the Forest. The standards are adaptable to subalpine lake shorelines, as well as oak woodland riverines. It allows for a maximum allowable use which is moderate when soils and vegetative conditions are satisfactory, and for a maximum allowable use which is light when soils and vegetative conditions are unsatisfactory.

(2) What is the impact on Willow Flycatcher Habitat?

Alternative 4 best compliments other Forest standards and guidelines in management of willow communities for willow flycatchers and other wildlife species. The selection of grazing standards for specific willow communities are based upon the resource values associated with those sites. The maximum allowable willow standards are either light or slight, with exclusion to grazing in some situations.

(3) What is the impact on Rawson's flaming trumpet?

Alternative 4 also best compliments other Forest standards and guidelines in management of riparian areas that are occupied by this sensitive plant. The selection of grazing standards for specific habitats would be based upon the resource values associated with those sites and the effects on this individual plant species.

(4) What is the impact on deer hiding cover?

The effects of implementing the selected standards and guides will be favorable to the establishment or maintenance of deer hiding cover. This would be most applicable in known deer population centers where resource value ratings associated with habitat structure could be used to establish grazing standards for livestock on montane meadow complexes, broadleaf trees, and woody shrubs.

- (5) What kind of monitoring will be required for each alternative, and can that monitoring be made uniform and readily applicable?

Alternative 4 would be applied using the concept of monitoring key plant species on key areas. The Forest Service would establish representative benchmarks within selected key areas for monitoring livestock grazing. This approach allows for consistent and readily applicable monitoring across the entire Forest and within realistic budget constraints.

- (6) Will any of the alternatives provide information concerning the accuracy of meadow range condition ratings?

There is considerable discussion given to meadow range conditions in the environmental analysis. There is also an inventory of known conditions listed in Appendix C of that report. Alternative 4 provides criteria for determining range condition on all rangelands across the Forest.

- (7) Is the use of increaser/decreaser species to determine meadow range condition valid?

The use of that concept is still valid and widely used by many people in the range management profession. As described in Alternative 4, the vegetative condition rating is one of several criteria that can be used in determining overall range condition.

VII. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE ALTERNATIVES THAT WERE CONSIDERED AND ANALYZED

The analysis considered a total of five alternatives, one of which was eliminated from detailed analysis and four that were analyzed in detail. The "Discontinued Livestock Grazing" alternative was formulated to represent the discontinuance of livestock grazing in the Sierra National Forest by permitted livestock. This alternative was eliminated from further study because grazing is a statutorily authorized use of National Forests. The Sierra Land and Resource Management Plan provides for livestock grazing, and grazing is one of the management goals addressed in that plan. This alternative would not have met the purpose and need of the proposed action, which assumes the continuance of grazing on the Forest, in conformance with specified standards. The four alternatives considered in detail included:

Alternative 1 -- Maintain Current Grazing Guidelines as Described in the Forest Plan. Develop and Implement Allowable Use Standards When Permits are Issued or Renewed. Program Emphasis in Riparian Areas (No Action).

The current guidelines, as described in the Forest Plan (EA pages 2-1 to 2-5) would have remained in effect. The Forest Plan would not have been further amended to include specific standards from the allowable guides in the (draft) R-5 FSH 2209.21 Rangeland Analysis Field Guide (May, 1993). Term grazing permits, temporary grazing permits, private land grazing permits, and special use pasture permits would be modified to incorporate those standards when issued or renewed, or through annual operating instructions until permit specific rangeland project decisions are made.

This alternative was not selected because it would not have met the need to provide Forest Officers and Forest users with a clear description of what is proper allowable

use of available forage for livestock. This alternative was also least responsive to addressing the management issues concerning this Forest activity.

Alternative 2 -- Maintain Current Grazing Guidelines as Described in the Forest Plan. Develop and Implement Forest-Wide Utilization Standards From Those Guidelines and Incorporate the Standards into All Relevant Permits.

This alternative is similar to Alternative 1. The Forest Plan would have been amended by replacing the wording in the first sentence of S&G 85b with specific allowable use standards rather than guidelines for all rangeland landscapes. The standards for wet, moist, and dry meadows, montane uplands, and annual grasslands would be similar to guidelines in Alternative 1. The willow utilization standards would be changed from the current thirty percent (30%) standard to those standards shown in Table 5 (EA page 2-6). All term grazing permits, temporary grazing permits, private land grazing permits, and special use pasture permits would be modified to incorporate standards applicable to those permits.

This alternative did provide more direction on implementing Forest-wide grazing standards. However, as with Alternative 1, it was not selected because it was less likely to resolve the issues associated with grazing activities.

Alternative 3 -- Maintain Current Grazing Guidelines as Described in the Forest Plan. Develop and Implement Forest-Wide Allowable Use Standards from Those Guidelines. Also, Develop and Implement Utilization Standards for Montane Meadows Based on Residual Dry Matter. Incorporate the Standards into All Relevant Permits.

This alternative was similar to Alternative 2 with regard to standards for: (1) Annual Grassland & Oak Woodland Sites (Table 4, EA page 2-5); (2) Willow Sites (Table 5, EA page 2-6)); and (3) Streamside Riparians, Upland Grass, Shrub, Tree, & Subalpine Sites (Table 6, EA page 2-7). The standards for Wet, Moist, & Dry Meadows would have been based upon residual dry matter guidelines illustrated in Table 7 (EA page 2-9). The standard for Aspen Sites would be implemented as illustrated in Table 8 (EA page 2-10). All term grazing permits, temporary grazing permits, private land grazing permits, and special use pasture permits would be modified to incorporate standards applicable to those permits.

This alternative would have resolved many of the issues associated with grazing on montane meadows. However, it was determined that the use of residual dry matter standards on meadows would be too complicated to implement Forest-wide. Also, the standards for annual grasslands, willows, and aspen were possibly too liberal (i.e., they might allow the livestock to utilize too much of the available vegetation and thereby not allow as fast a recovery period as other Alternatives) and did not provide for the resource protection that the other Alternatives afforded. In addition, there were no specific standards identified for upland vegetation or dry meadows.

Alternative 4 -- Implement Revised Forest-Wide Allowable Use Standards and Guidelines Based Upon Desired Condition. Establish Proper Use for Annual Grasslands Using Residual Dry Matter Standards; for Montane Meadows Using Stubble Height Standards; and for Upland Herbaceous and Woody Vegetation using Utilization Standards. Incorporate the Standards into All Relevant Permits.

This is the Forest Service proposed alternative that I am selecting. This alternative was derived from a combination of all the other alternatives, including the Stubble Height alternative which was eliminated from further study in the initial January 6th environmental assessment. The standards in this alternative were also established to correlate directly with a proposed Desired Condition statement for satisfactory and unsatisfactory rangelands. The intent of this alternative is to

provide for more direct standards and guidelines which allow for emphasis of other resource values.

**VII. IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS DECISION
AND OTHER RELATED FUTURE ACTIONS**

We will begin implementing this action this fall, prior to the winter grazing season which generally begins December 15th. Each term grazing permit will be modified to comply with the standards and guidelines which are relevant to the specific allotment(s). It is anticipated that the special conditions for all grazing permits will be consistent with the Forest Plan by the end of calendar year 1996.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS
(40 CFR 1508.27)

I have determined that my decision to select Alternative 4, analyzed in the Environmental Assessment, is not a major federal action which would significantly affect the quality of the human environment either beneficially or adversely; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not needed for this analysis. This determination is based on the following factors:

(1) No extraordinary circumstances exist that might cause significant effects; I believe that on balance the effects of this proposal, though not significant, will be beneficial.

(2) Implementation of this proposal will have no unfavorable effects on the public's health or safety.

(3) There are no anticipated adverse affects on wetlands, ecologically critical areas, or prime farm lands which exist on this forest. This is because all of the anticipated effects on these areas are believed to result in an improvement in these areas over the long-term because of the selection of Alternative 4 (EA page 4-1 thru 4-16).

(4&5) This action does not establish any precedent of significant effect for future actions. Nor does it relate to any other actions which will cause a cumulative significant impact on the environment.

(6) Continuation of grazing generally creates a risk of adverse affects on some Cultural Resources. Implementation of this proposal, however, will not increase that risk and I find this Proposed Action to be in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). Potential adverse effects to Cultural Resources will be addressed on a case by case basis during site-specific allotment planning and analysis. The Forest Service will be working under provisions of the Programmatic Agreement between U.S.D.A., Forest Service and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation signed on June 19, 1995.

(9) Biological Assessments and Evaluations have been prepared for this proposal (EA Appendix A) and there will be no anticipated adverse effects to threatened, endangered, or sensitive species known to exist on the Forest. Consequently, I find this proposal to be in compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

(10) In reviewing this Proposed Action I find it to be in compliance with the general goals and direction of the Sierra National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan, National Forest Management Act (NFMA) in that the plan is being amended to bring all practices on the Forest into compliance with the overall goals and direction of the Sierra NF LMP, and Clean Water Act (CWA). Additionally, this amendment does not threaten violation of any federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

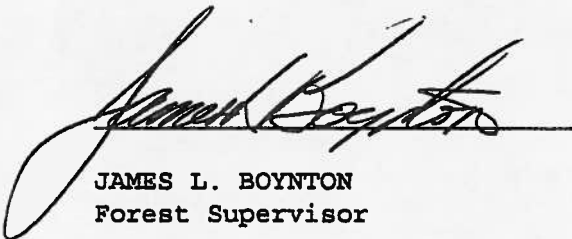
In keeping with the requirement of FSM 1922.51 and FSH 1909.12 part 5.32, I find adoption of the Selected Alternative to be a nonsignificant amendment to the Sierra National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan because:

(1) The selected action does not significantly alter the multiple-use goals and objectives for long-term land and resource management; and (2) The selected action is a minor change to existing standards and guidelines.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 217. Any written notice of appeal concerning this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 217.9, "Content of a Notice of Appeal," including the reasons for appeal. Two copies of the appeal must be filed with Regional Forester G. Lynn Sprague, U.S. Forest Service, 630 Sansome Street, San Francisco, CA 94111 within 45 days of the date legal notice of this decision is posted. The anticipated date of legal notice is September.

For further information contact: Merlin Hehnke, Land Management Planning Officer, Sierra National Forest, 1600 Tollhouse Rd., Clovis, CA 93611, (209) 297-0706.



JAMES L. BOYNTON
Forest Supervisor



DATE: